

# ALEUTIAN ISLANDS STATE-WATERS SABLEFISH FISHERY

Report to the Alaska Board of Fisheries

By

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## ABSTRACT

The Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish *Anoplopoma fimbria* fishery commenced in 1995, concurrent to the individual fishing quota sablefish fishery in federal waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone. State waters are primarily from the shore to 3 nautical miles offshore, and federal waters are from 3 to 200 nautical miles offshore. The state-managed fishery is open to all fishers possessing a valid Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission interim use permit card for statewide sablefish. The season runs from March 15 to November 15 unless closed earlier by emergency order upon attainment of the guideline harvest level.

Annual harvest in this fishery has ranged from 254,000 to 436,000 pounds, with an average 327,000 pounds. Total harvest since 1995 is over 1.96 million pounds, which has produced an exvessel fishery value of over \$3.5 million. There have been 127 unique vessels participating in this fishery, with an average of 33 vessels and 66 deliveries per year. Harvest has predominantly been by longline vessels, almost 97% of the fishery to date; trawl vessels have taken over 15% of the harvest in a given year. Bycatch retention of sablefish after season closures in state waters has not been allowed since the survival rate of released fish is thought to be good. Non-quota fishers, those who do not possess individual fishing quota or community development quota shares, have accounted for 37% of the fleet, 57% of the deliveries, and 56% of the harvest.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) implemented an individual fishing quota (IFQ) system for the harvest of sablefish *Anoplopoma fimbria* in federal waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This system did not account for a portion of the historical harvest of sablefish that had been taken from the state waters of Alaska. The Alaska Department of Law advised that the harvest of sablefish in the state waters of Alaska could not be limited to IFQ permit holders, therefore any holder of a valid Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC) interim use permit for statewide sablefish could participate. A fishery for sablefish was established in areas of the state where the historical harvest of this species was of sufficient quantity to allow for a manageable fishery. The Aleutian Islands Area (as defined below) is the only area in the Westward Region a state-managed fishery was established.

## DESCRIPTION OF AREA

The Aleutian Islands state-water sablefish fishery area (Figure 1) encompasses all state waters of the Bering Sea south of the latitude of Cape Sarichef ( $54^{\circ} 36'$  North latitude), and of the Pacific Ocean west of the longitude of Scotch Cap Light ( $164^{\circ} 44'$  West longitude). This area includes all of the state groundfish registration area of the Bering Sea - Aleutian Islands Area south of Cape Sarichef and part of the South Alaska Peninsula Area from Scotch Cap Light to  $170^{\circ}$  West longitude (Figure 2). The federal areas adjacent to state fishery area are the Aleutian Islands Sablefish Regulatory Area, the Bering Sea Sablefish Regulatory Area south of Cape Sarichef, and the Western Gulf of Alaska Sablefish Regulatory west of Scotch Cap Light.

## FISHERY HISTORY

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), in 1995, established March 15 as the opening date and November 15 as the closing date for this new fishery, unless the guideline harvest level (GHL) was obtained and the fishery was closed earlier by emergency order (EO). The opening and closing dates were chosen to run concurrent with the IFQ fishery. The GHL was to be set according to recent state water harvest history. Legal gear types for this fishery are, by regulation, trawls, longlines, pots, seines, mechanical jigging machines, hand troll and dinglebar troll gear. Registration for the sablefish fishery was the same as for other groundfish fisheries, except vessels were registered only for that fishery.

### 1995

The 1995 sablefish fishery in state waters of the Aleutian Islands opened with a GHL of 400,000 pounds, the average harvest from this area during the previous four years. Most of the effort in the fishery occurred in conjunction with the federally managed Greenland turbot *Reinhardtius hippoglossoides* and IFQ sablefish fisheries, and with the IFQ Pacific halibut *Hippoglossus stenolepis* fishery. A total of 37 vessels made 61 deliveries for a season harvest of 272,320 round pounds (Table 1 and Figure 3). The fishery was closed by regulation on November 15

after a 245-day season (Table 2). Average exvessel price in Dutch Harbor was \$2.96 per pound dressed weight; the estimated total value for the 1995 state water sablefish fishery was over

\$500,000. Eight non-quota vessels made 29 deliveries for 111,862 pounds, or 41% of the harvest (Table 3 and Figure 4). There were 29 IFQ or community development quota (CDQ) vessels that made 32 deliveries for a total of 160,458 pounds, or 59% of the harvest. Two catcher-processors participated in the fishery, both of which had IFQ shares. Trawl vessels harvested over 15% of the sablefish taken, while longline vessels took the remainder (Table 4).

### ***1996***

A harvest range of 270,000 to 300,000 pounds was established for the 1996 season based on the 1995 NMFS survey which showed sablefish stock reductions in the federal Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands and Western Gulf of Alaska Sablefish Regulatory Areas. A GHL of 280,000 pounds was subsequently set during the season. Effort increased during the 1996 season and the fishery was closed by emergency order on July 26, after a 133-day fishery. At that time 24 vessels had made 48 deliveries and harvested 294,384 round pounds. Subsequent to the closure 11 additional vessels made landings containing sablefish harvested from state waters. Eight of the vessels possessed IFQ or CDQ permits. Information concerning the late deliveries was given to the Department of Public Safety, Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection (FWP). The total state water harvest of sablefish in 1996 was 401,328 pounds; a total of 35 vessels made 67 deliveries in 1996. Average exvessel price per pound in Dutch Harbor was \$2.54 dressed weight; the estimated fishery value of all state water activity was \$642,000. Nine non-quota vessels made 32 deliveries for a harvest of 203,844 pounds. This represents 51% of the total harvest. There were 26 IFQ or CDQ vessels that participated in the fishery; they made 35 deliveries for 197,484 pounds, or 49% of the harvest. Five catcher-processors participated in the fishery, two of which had IFQ shares. While trawl and pot vessels harvested sablefish from state waters, virtually all of the harvest was by longline vessels.

### ***1997***

In 1997 the Dutch Harbor office of ADF&G issued a news release on March 12 announcing the GHL of 270,000 pounds and reminding all fishermen of the registration requirements necessary to participate in the state-waters sablefish fishery. The GHL was based in part on the 1996 NMFS survey, which showed no improvement in stock abundance. The reduction of 10,000 pounds was to adjust the state water GHL to reflect the same percentage decrease as in the federal total allowable catch (TAC) since the 1995 season. The 1997 fishery was closed by EO on July 20 after a 127-day fishery. Thirty-two vessels had made 58 deliveries and harvested 278,906 pounds. Subsequent to the closure nine IFQ vessels and one CDQ vessel made deliveries that contained sablefish harvested from state waters. Information regarding these late deliveries was given to FWP. The total 1997 sablefish fishery in state waters had 39 unique vessels, which made 75 deliveries for a harvest of 317,408 pounds. Average exvessel price per pound in Dutch Harbor was \$3.55 dressed weight; estimated fishery value for all state water activity was \$710,000. Twenty non-quota vessels made 48 deliveries for 180,859 pounds, or 57% of the harvest. There were 19 IFQ or CDQ vessels that made 27 deliveries for a total of 136,549 pounds, or 43% of the harvest. Three catcher-processors participated in the fishery, two

of which had IFQ shares. Longline vessels harvested over 98% of the sablefish taken in 1997, pot vessels harvested under 2% while trawl vessels harvest the remainder.

### ***1998***

The GHL for 1998 was 270,000 pounds, the same as for the 1997 season. The TAC for the federal Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands sablefish regulatory areas increased by 16 percent. However, the department did not increase the quota in state waters to help mitigate the over harvest, primarily by IFQ vessels, which occurred during the previous two seasons. The department issued a news release on March 12, 1998 announcing the GHL and notifying all fishermen of the registration requirements necessary to fish for sablefish in state waters. All area processors were contacted by department personnel and were requested to remind fishermen to register. Also, NMFS personnel in Dutch Harbor advised fishers to contact ADF&G regarding registration for the state-waters fishery. The fishery closed by regulation on November 15. A total of 38 vessels made 101 deliveries and harvested 254,348 round pounds during the fishery. Average exvessel price per pound in Dutch Harbor was \$2.18 dressed weight; estimated fishery value was \$350,000. Factors contributing to the lower performance could be the reduced effort toward Greenland turbot in the Aleutian Islands, the low exvessel value of both sablefish and Pacific halibut, and an economically depressed Asian market. Twenty-six non-quota vessels participated in the fishery, and they made 84 deliveries. The non-quota vessels delivered 160,490 pounds, which was 63% of the harvest. Twelve IFQ or CDQ vessels participated in the fishery and they made 17 deliveries. The IFQ or CDQ vessels delivered 93,858 pounds, or 37% of the harvest. Two catcher-processors participated in the fishery, both of which had IFQ shares. Longline vessels harvested 99% of the sablefish taken, while 1% was taken by trawl vessels.

### ***1999***

For the 1999 sablefish fishery, ADF&G issued a news release on March 12 to announce the GHL of 250,000 pounds. The federal TAC for the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands federal regulatory areas increased slightly for 1999; however, the department decreased the 1999 GHL for state waters due to poor fishery performance in 1998. The news release informed all fishers of the registration requirements. Additionally, all area processors were contacted by department personnel and were requested to remind fishers to register; also, NMFS personnel in Dutch Harbor advised fishermen to contact ADF&G regarding sablefish registration for state waters. The fishery was closed by EO on August 16 after 154 days, with a harvest of 249,017 pounds. Subsequent to the closure 11 additional deliveries occurred. This harvest came from quota share fishers, primarily from CDQ fishers. A total of 23 vessels made 37 deliveries and harvested 279,649 round pounds during the 1999 fishery (Table 1). Average exvessel price per pound in Dutch Harbor was \$2.69 dressed weight; estimated fishery value was \$474,000. The increase in fishery performance is reflective of the NMFS survey that showed an increase in sablefish abundance in the last two years. Six non-quota and 19 IFQ/CDQ vessels participated in the fishery (two participated first as non-quota and later as quota vessels). Non-quota vessels made 9 deliveries, while quota vessels made 28 deliveries. Non-IFQ vessels delivered 122,066 pounds, which was 44% of the harvest; IFQ vessels delivered 157,583 pounds, or 56% of the harvest. Seven catcher-processors participated in the fishery. Six of the catcher-processors had IFQ or CDQ shares, a three-fold increase compared to prior years. Pot vessels harvested under



1% of the sablefish taken in 1999, trawl vessels took over 2% and the remaining 97% was taken by longline vessels.

The majority of the harvest after the closure was by vessels participating in the Multi-Species CDQ (MS CDQ) Program. Regulations governing the program have mandatory retention requirements for all unobserved vessels as long as there is quota available for that species. This requirement includes sablefish harvested in state waters, and is in direct conflict with state regulations governing closed waters. No legal action regarding closed water fishing was taken due to the conflicting regulations; fishers were advised that state regulations prevail in the territorial waters of Alaska and further retention of sablefish harvested from state waters would result in a citation. NMFS has indicated the federal retention regulation will be changed. One IFQ fisher was mistakenly registered to fish state waters after the closure that resulted in one late delivery; no legal action was taken.

## **2000 FISHERY**

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game issued a news release on March 16 announcing a GHL of 400,000 pounds. This GHL represents a 60% increase over the 1999 fishery. Recent fishery performance, historic fishery harvest, and the federal TAC were used to determine the GHL for this state-waters fishery. Fishery performance in 1999, in terms of pounds per delivery and date of fishery closure, exceeded that of the 1998 fishery, and was similar to that observed for the 1996 and 1997 fisheries. Harvest of sablefish in state waters since 1990 has averaged approximately 5% of the TAC established by the NMFS survey for the Eastern Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Sablefish Regulatory Areas. Accordingly, the GHL for 2000 could have been over 426,000 pounds; however, the department reduced this amount to 400,000 pounds due to a history of continued harvest of sablefish from state waters after the closure announcement.

The fishery opened March 15 and deliveries began on April 1. The fishery harvest averaged approximately 2,400 pounds per day through April, and rose to over 3,600 pounds for the period from May 1 to June 10. The average daily harvest continued to increase to 4,900 pounds through July 13. With a total harvest of 386,000 pounds harvested through July 13, a closure was announced for noon on July 15. At the closure, 21 vessels had made 45 deliveries for 400,436 pounds. Over 73,000 pounds of the total harvest at the time of the closure was from a statistical area that included both state and federal waters, or from fish tickets with incorrect statistical areas. All of this harvest was considered as state-water harvest for fishery management purposes. Department staff and FWP troopers have since verified a minimum of 14,909 pounds was from federal waters of the EEZ. Subsequent to the closure six IFQ vessels delivered an additional 50,663 pounds. All information regarding these late deliveries was turned over to FWP for subsequent legal action.

For the 2000 Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 25 vessels made 56 deliveries for a total harvest of 436,190 pounds (Table 1). Harvest peaked in May with over 125,000 pounds (Figure 5). The number of deliveries and vessels also peaked in May, after which the harvest, number of vessels and deliveries declined through the closure.

The exvessel price per pound for the 2000 fishery was \$3.04 (Table 2), exceeding the 1999 exvessel price by \$0.35 per pound. The exvessel price was the second highest for the fishery since 1995. The fishery value to the fleet of \$835,000 was significantly higher than the \$474,000 for the 1999 fishery. The 2000 fishery value was the highest recorded for the state-water fishery.

Problems encountered with the mandatory sablefish retention requirements of the MS-CDQ program did not occur in 2000. The retention requirement was intended to attain full accounting of fish harvested through the program. The survival of released sablefish is thought to be good, therefore, was not a conservation concern. The NMFS notified all CDQ groups early in the season that in waters under the jurisdiction of the State of Alaska the mandatory retention requirements would not be enforced if those waters have been closed by the state.

Six non-quota vessels participated in the fishery, and they made 25 deliveries. The non-quota vessels delivered 323,620 pounds, which was 74% of the harvest (Table 3). Twenty-one IFQ or CDQ vessels participated in the fishery and they made 31 deliveries. The IFQ or CDQ vessels delivered 112,570 pounds, or 26% of the harvest. Two vessels participated first as non-quota and later as quota vessels. Seven catcher-processors participated in the fishery, six of which had IFQ or CDQ shares. Longline vessels harvested over 99% of the sablefish taken and pot vessels harvested the rest.

The fishery was primarily conducted in the waters west of 175° West longitude (Figures 6 and 7), which is consistent with recent fisheries. The harvest of 436,190 pounds is the most on record for the state-water fishery, while the 2000 season was the shortest since the fishery started in 1995 (Figure 8). The increase in fishery performance reflects the recent increase in abundance noted by the NMFS survey. Verbal information from the fleet indicated abundant sablefish throughout the entire area, especially the area west of Atka Island, and that predation by killer whales *Orcinus orca* remains to be a problem in the area east of 170° West longitude. The problems of killer whale encounters, and a new processor located on Adak Island may help explain the shift in effort to areas to the west (Figure 9).

## SUMMARY

The Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery started in 1995. In the six-year history of this fishery 127 vessels have harvested over 1.96 million pounds, which produced an exvessel fishery value of over \$3.5 million. In the Aleutian Islands sablefish fishery through 2000, non-quota fishers accounted for 37% of the fleet, 57% of the deliveries, and 56% of the harvest. Nineteen catcher-processors have participated in this fishery through 2000, fourteen of which had quota shares.

The Aleutian Islands state-water fishery is open to all fishers with valid CFEC interim use permit for statewide sablefish. There has been a misconception by some CDQ and IFQ fishers who believe the federal permit allows fishing in state waters without registration and regardless of closures of state waters. Documentation of all violations has been provided to the Department of Public Safety, Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection for further action. ADF&G and NMFS have continued to increase efforts to educate the fishing fleet about state registration requirements.

Currently, all legal groundfish gear may be used in the directed harvest of sablefish in state waters of the Aleutian Islands. The use of trawl gear in the sablefish fishery has varied greatly between years (Table 4), since 1995 approximately 2.7% of the harvest has been taken by trawl gear. However, trawl gear has accounted for over 15% of the harvest in a single year, and during that year 94% of the trawl harvest was taken by one vessel in less than three days. The department is concerned that if trawl effort increases the fishery could be unmanageable. Seine gear is not an effective gear to harvest adult sablefish. The state-water fishery primarily occurs during the late spring and summer and the department is concerned with bycatch of salmon, herring and other species with the use of seine gear. Dinglebar troll gear is not legal gear in Southeast Alaska or Cook Inlet; in Prince William Sound it is not specifically prohibited but the fishery is limited entry and no permits for dinglebar troll gear exist. It would be consistent with existing regulations not to allow dinglebar troll gear in the Aleutian Islands fishery and the department would have concerns of rockfish and other species bycatch if it was allowed.

The harvest of sablefish in state waters of the Aleutian Islands has decreased since 1985 from 1.4 million pounds to 254 thousand pounds in 1998. Harvest in the state-managed fishery was 272 thousand pounds during the first year, and has ranged through a low of 254 thousand pounds in 1998 and to a high of 436 thousand pounds in 2000.

## **STATUS OF STOCK**

The National Marine Fisheries Service has conducted annual longline surveys covering portions of the Aleutian Islands sablefish fishery area since 1978. Initially the survey, which was a cooperative effort with Japan, covered the Gulf of Alaska; the survey was expanded to include the Aleutian Islands in 1980 and the Eastern Bering Sea in 1982. Results of the surveys through 1994 show a decrease in sablefish abundance from a high in the mid 1980s.

In 1987 NMFS started an independent annual longline survey in the Gulf of Alaska. That survey was expanded to include biennial sampling of the eastern Aleutian Islands in 1996 and the eastern Bering Sea in 1997. The survey, which covers a portion of the state-water fishery area, shows an increase in abundance since 1997. Sablefish abundance, however, is still well below the levels observed in 1986 and 1987.

Table 1. Guideline harvest level, number of vessels and deliveries, and the harvest in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 1995 - 2000.

Year	Guideline Harvest Level <sup>a</sup>	Number of		Harvest <sup>a</sup>
		Vessels	Deliveries	
1995	400,000	37	61	272,320
1996	280,000	35	67	401,328
1997	270,000	39	75	317,408
1998	270,000	38	101	254,348
1999	250,000	23	37	279,649
2000	400,000	25	56	436,190

<sup>a</sup>In round pounds.

Table 2. Economic performance, season length and dates in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 1995 - 2000.

Year	Fishery Value	Exvessel Value <sup>a</sup>	Season Length <sup>b</sup>	Season Dates	
				Opened	Closed
1995	\$500,000	\$2.96	245	15-Mar	15-Nov
1996	\$642,000	\$2.54	133	15-Mar	26-Jul
1997	\$710,000	\$3.55	127	15-Mar	20-Jul
1998	\$350,000	\$2.18	245	15-Mar	15-Nov
1999	\$474,000	\$2.69	154	15-Mar	16-Aug
2000	\$835,000	\$3.04	122	15-Mar	15-Jul

<sup>a</sup>Per pound dressed weight.

<sup>b</sup>In days.

Table 3. Percent of the fleet, deliveries and harvest in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery by non-quota and quota vessels, 1995 - 2000.

Year	Non-quota Vessels <sup>1</sup>			Quota Vessels <sup>2</sup>		
	Fleet	Deliveries	Harvest	Fleet	Deliveries	Harvest
1995	22%	48%	41%	78%	52%	59%
1996	26%	48%	51%	74%	52%	49%
1997	51%	64%	57%	49%	36%	43%
1998	68%	83%	63%	32%	17%	37%
1999	25%	24%	44%	75%	76%	56%
2000	20%	45%	74%	80%	55%	26%
Average	37%	57%	56%	63%	43%	44%

<sup>1</sup>Vessels without individual fishing quota or community development quota shares.

<sup>2</sup>Vessels with individual fishing quota or community development quota shares.

Table 4. Harvest, by gear type, in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 1995 - 2000.

Year	Longline	Trawl	Pot	Total
1995	230,531	41,789	0	272,320
1996	401,294	26	8	401,328
1997	312,353	20	5,035	317,408
1998	252,169	2,179	0	254,348
1999	271,970	6,385	1,294	279,649
2000	435,742	0	448	436,190
Total	1,904,059	50,399	6,785	1,961,243

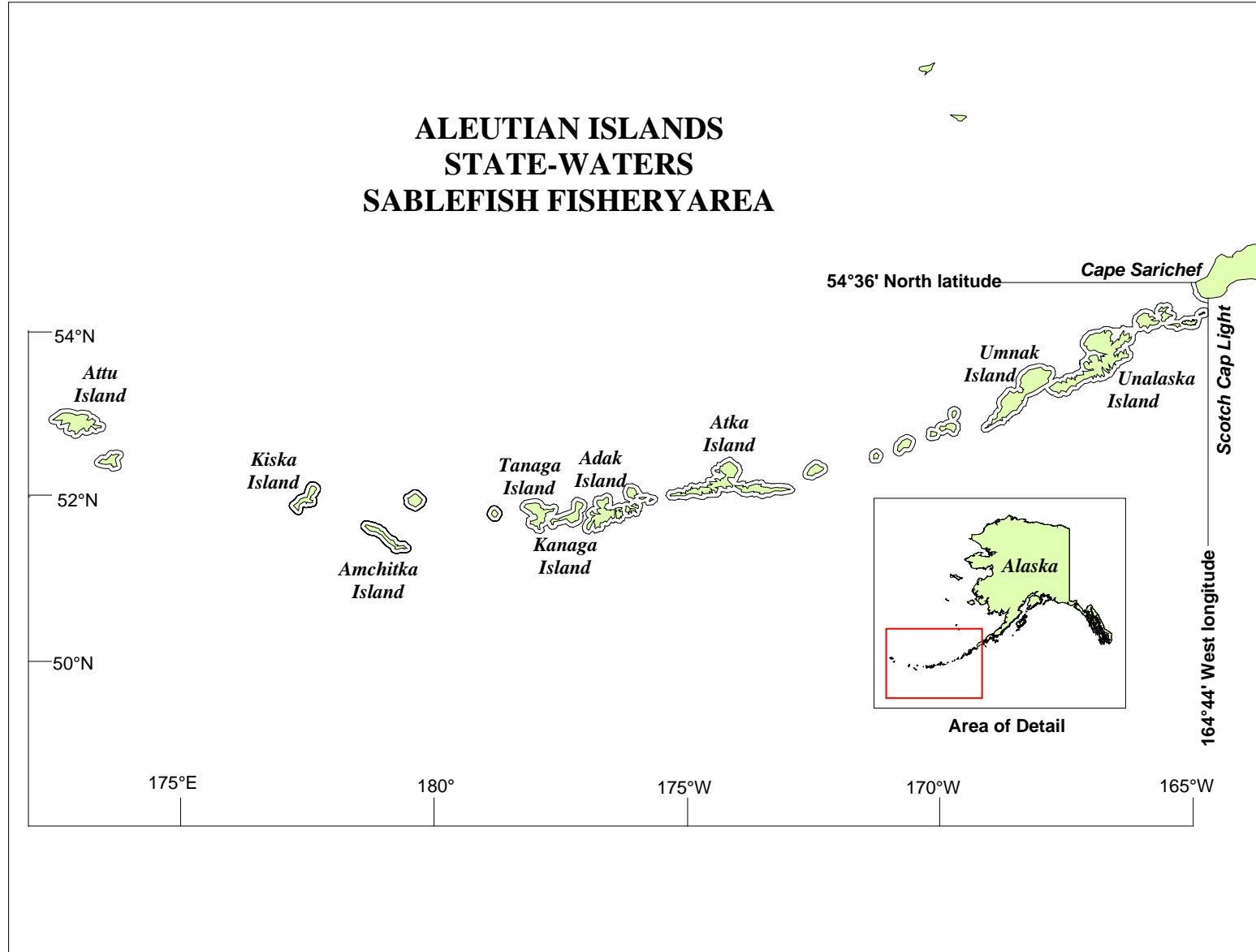


Figure 1. Map of the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery area.



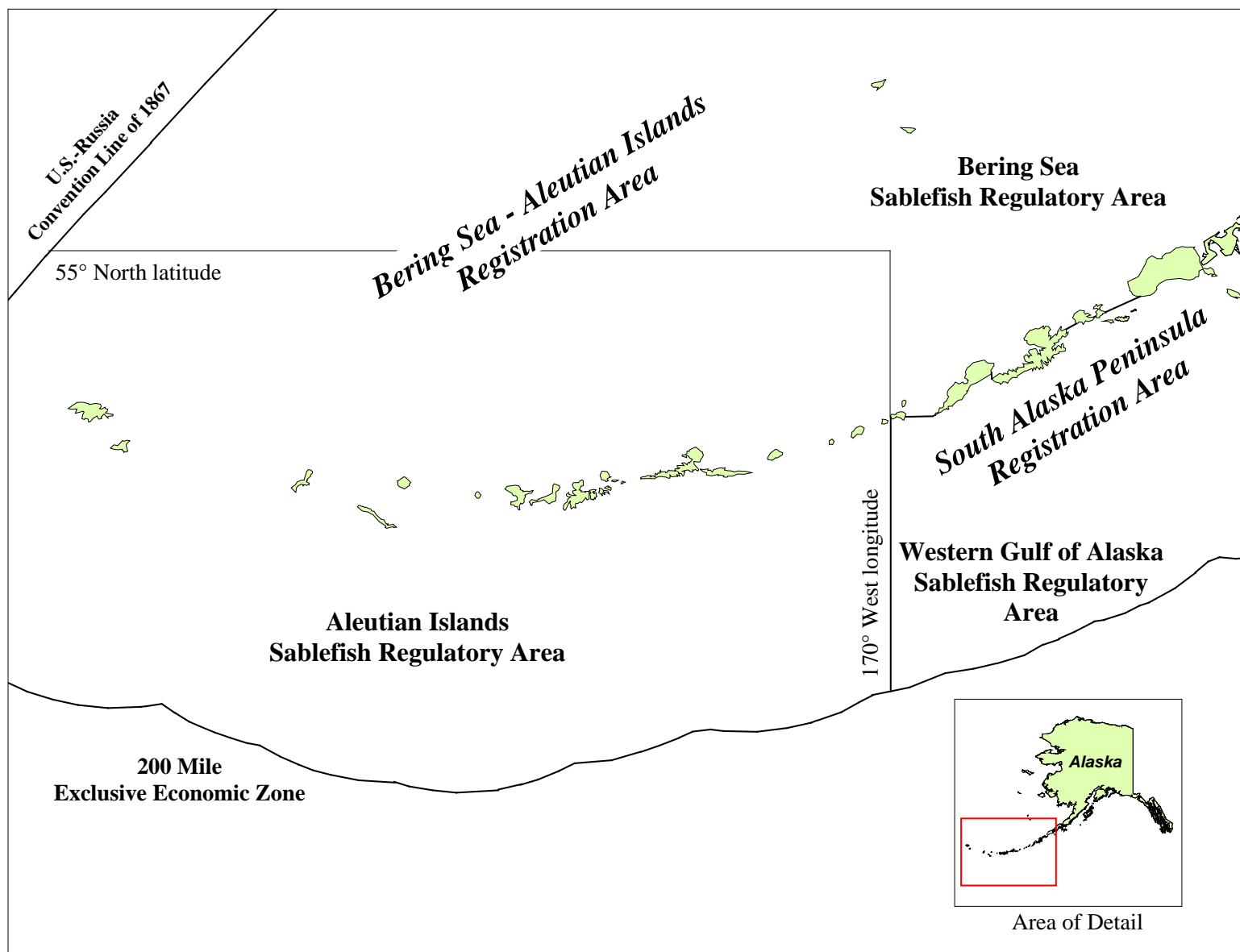


Figure 2. Map of the state groundfish registration areas and federal sablefish regulatory areas.

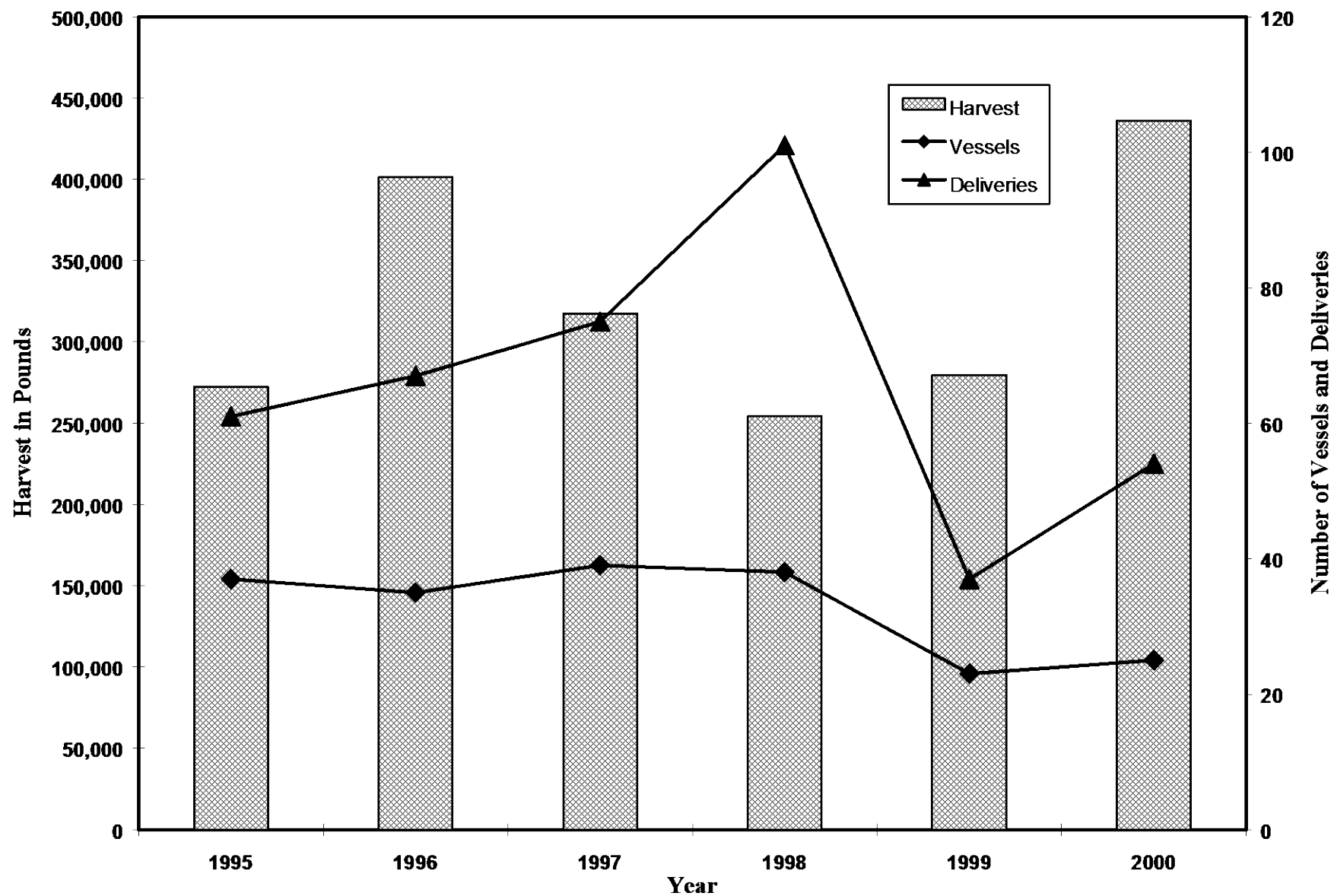


Figure 3. Harvest, number of vessels and deliveries in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 1995 to 2000.

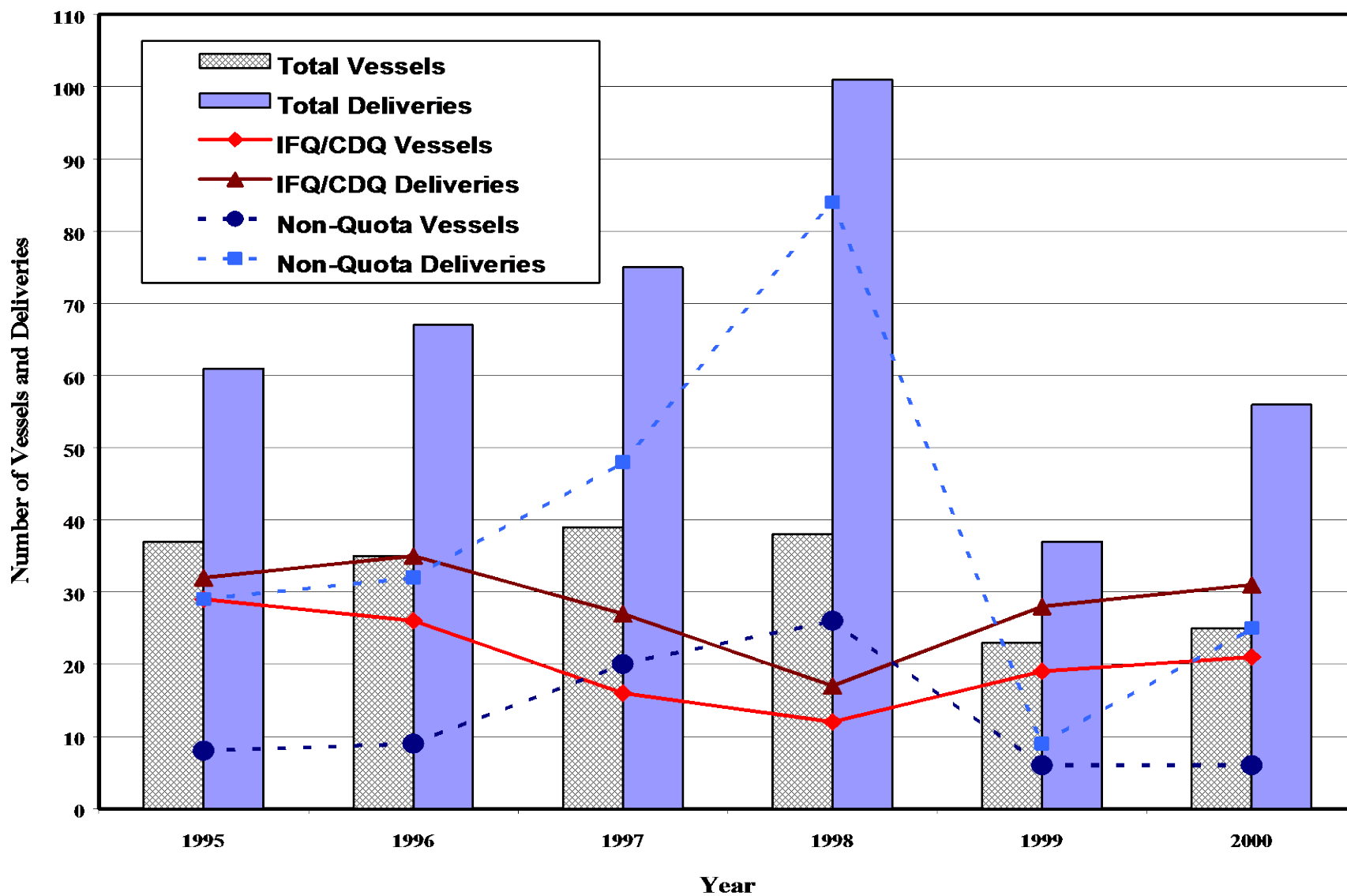


Figure 4. Number of vessels and deliveries from 1995 through 2000 showing the non-quota and the IFQ/CDQ participants in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery.

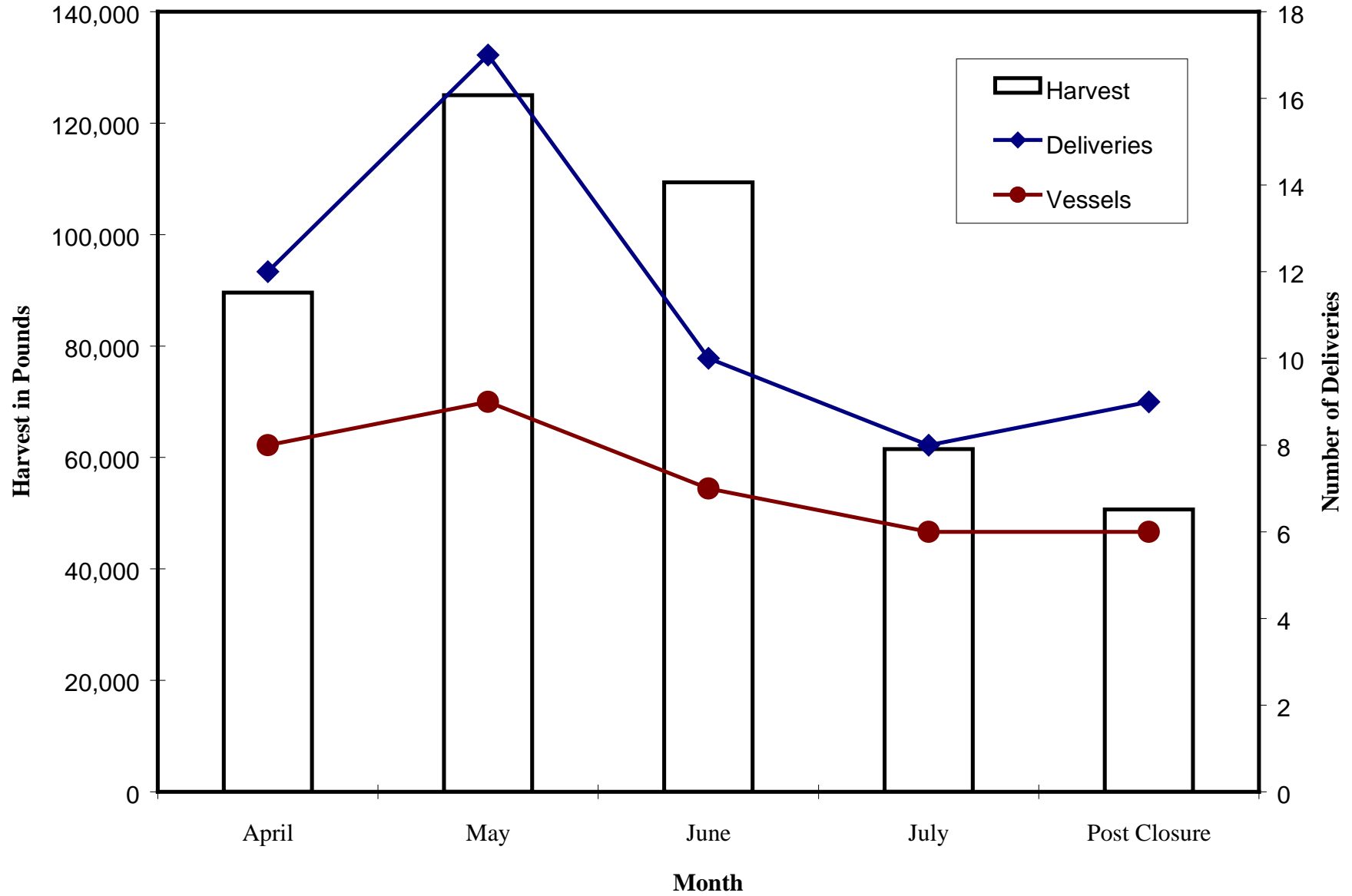


Figure 5. Harvest, number of vessels and deliveries, by month, in the 2000 Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery.

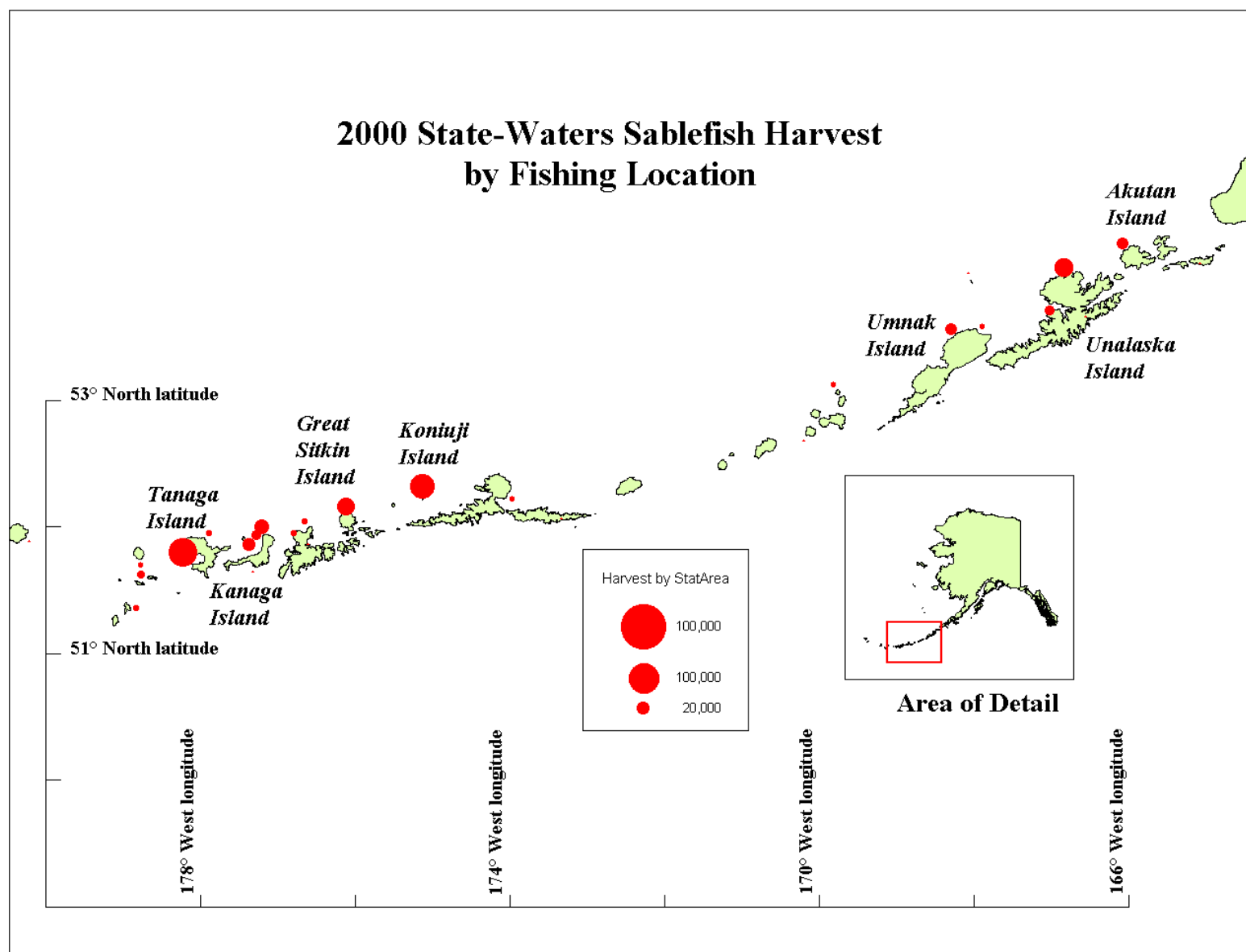


Figure 6. The area of harvest in the 2000 state-waters sablefish fishery based on fish ticket data.

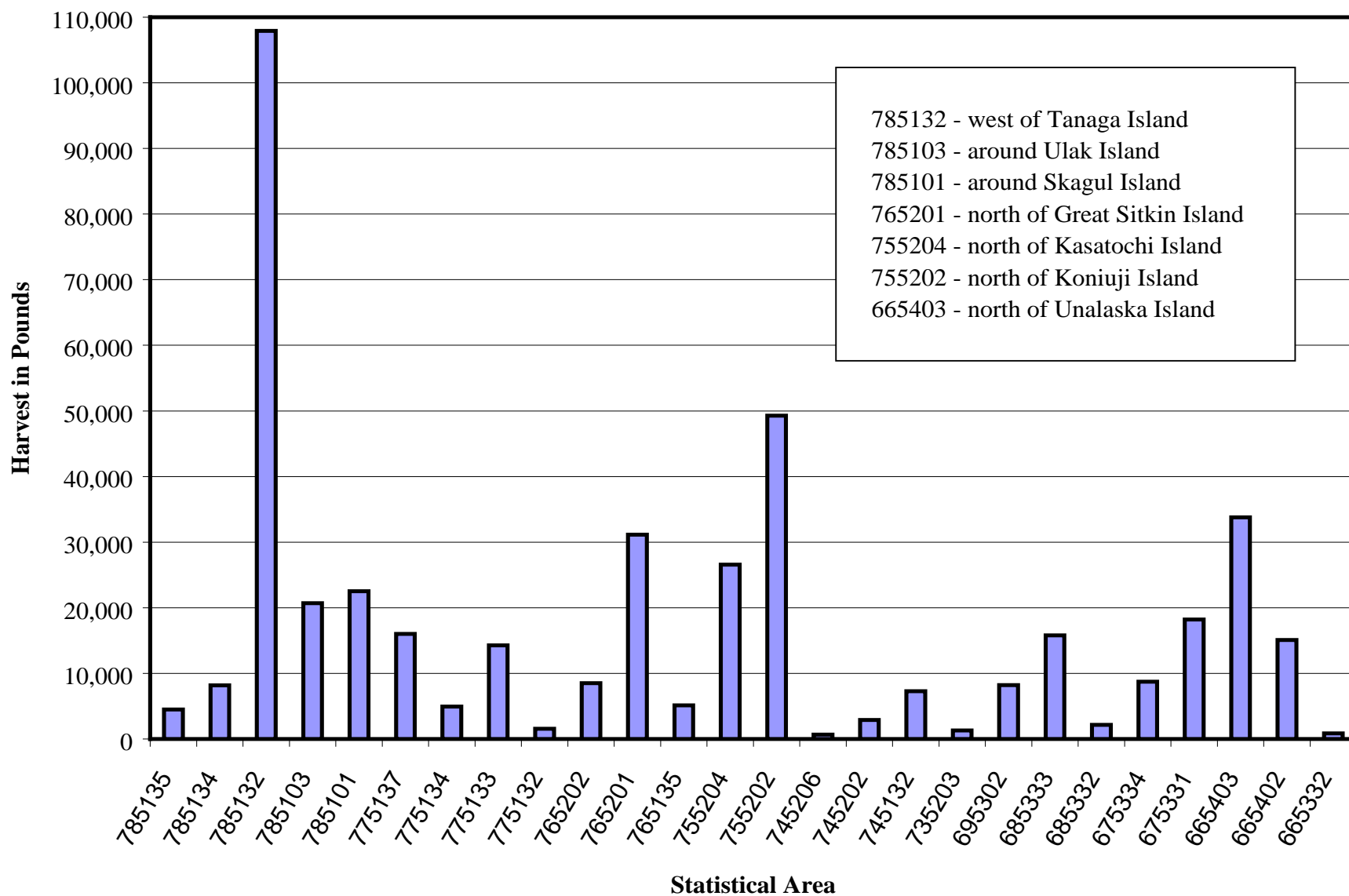


Figure 7. The 2000 harvest of Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish, by statistical area, listing the islands adjacent to the waters with a harvest of 20,000 pounds or more.

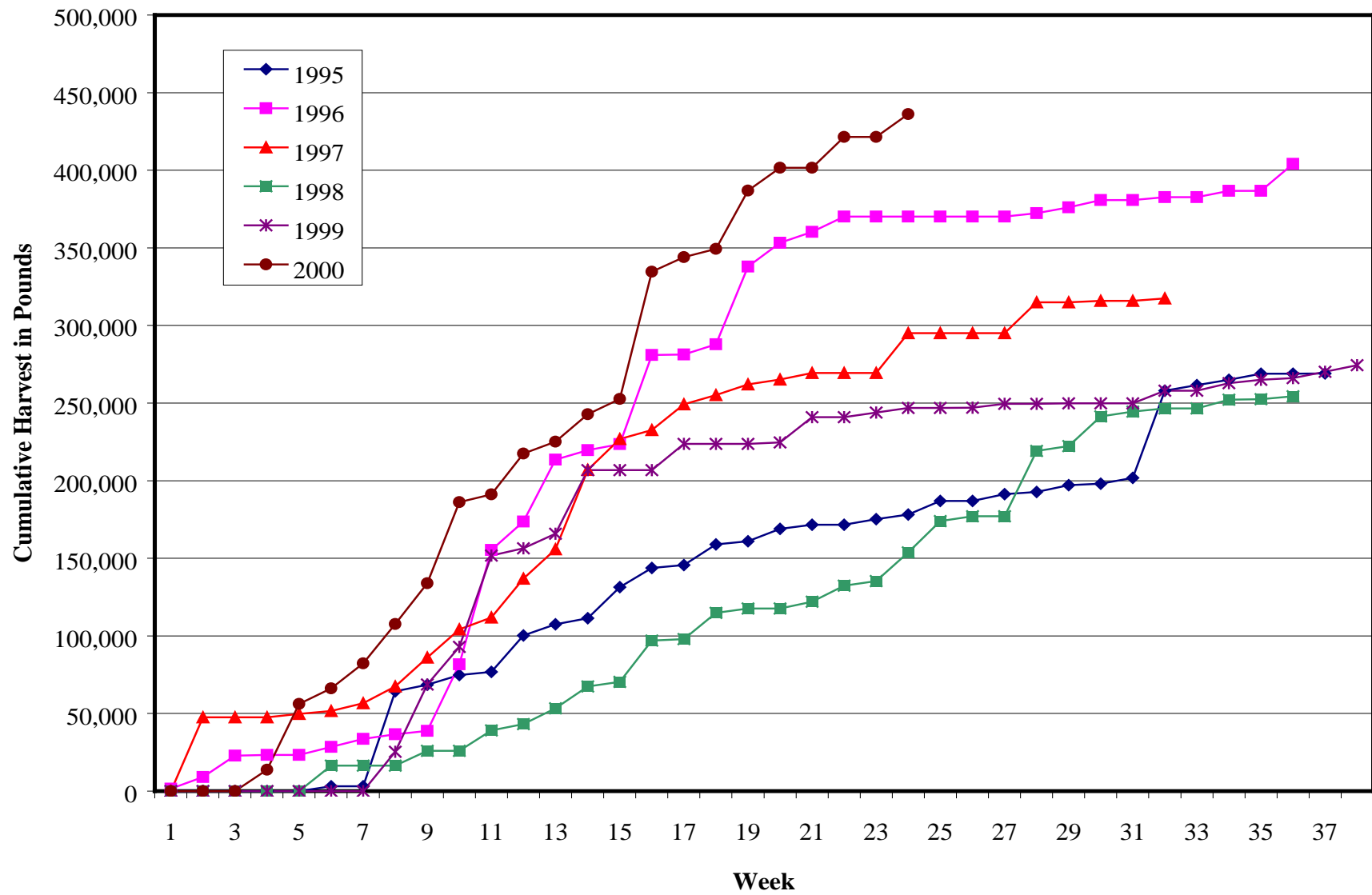


Figure 8. Harvest timing in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, by year, from 1995 to 2000.

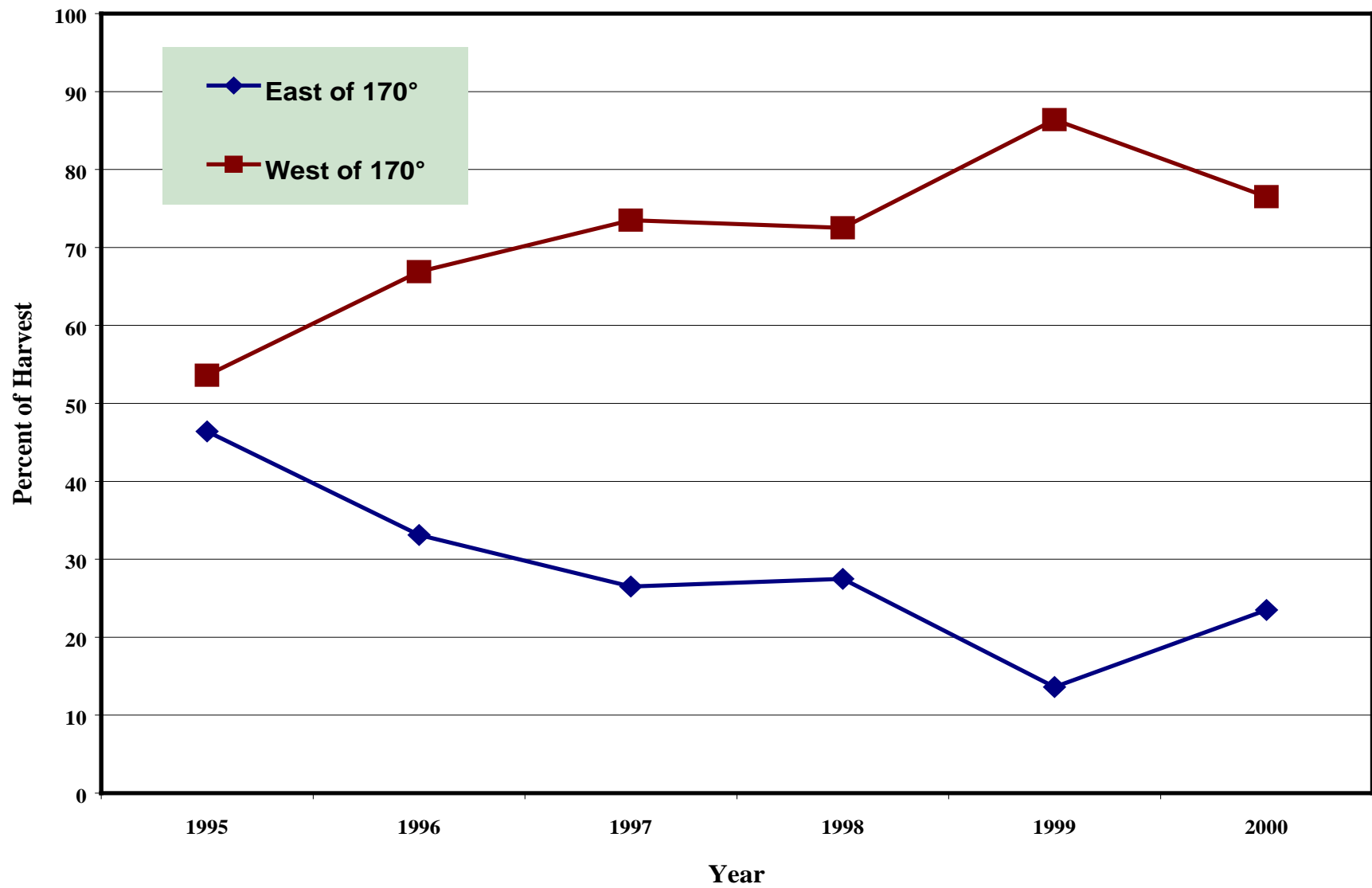


Figure 9. Percentage of harvest east and west of 170° West longitude in the Aleutian Islands state-waters sablefish fishery, 1995 to 2000.